

# LGA Customer Services Peer Challenge

Rotherham Metropolitan Borough  
Council

7<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> June 2022

Feedback report





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# 1. Executive summary

Rotherham Council has a vision to provide improved customer access and experience. The aim is that whatever part of the council a resident or customer contacts, they receive the same standard of service. There have been some corporate changes to working patterns, systems and processes to achieve this vision. It appears to the peer team that it is heading in the right direction, but that there is more work to do to ensure that everyone is bought into the improved customer access and experience approach.

For the council's vision to become real, systems, processes and training for staff at all Rotherham's contact centres, and any service that has direct contact with customers, should focus on the same customer service values and improved customer outcomes. It is important to recognise that changes in behaviours and systems across the whole council are necessary to effect real change in the wholesale customer experience improvements that the council wants. This means that all services, and service managers, need to embrace the ethos of customer focus, embedding the idea in all service plans and strategies.

The council's website has seen significant improvement, however more work is needed to ensure it has a greater focus on customers of RMBC. The peer team reviewed several web forms, and in their view, these are fit for purpose. In time, it would be beneficial for forms to be better integrated with corporate systems to be able to evaluate an enquirer's wider needs or identify if the enquiry is a repeat or from a frequent or malicious customer.

The latest performance report demonstrated that call wait times are mostly meeting the six-minute performance target. There would be value in ensuring that the success of the Customer Contact Centre in achieving this performance target is better communicated as not all senior managers or councillors were aware of this. The peer team feel that six minutes is an appropriate and acceptable wait time target. A full benchmarking exercise could be a good way to explore how to continually improve target wait times.

Long call wait times are often symptoms of broader service issues more than of actions in the Customer Contact Centre. The peer team observed several calls in the

Corporate Contact Centre which were all preventable repeat contacts with the council. This may be an indication of the need to review how the Customer Services Team are involved in changes to service provision and improve communication between service delivery by RMBC departments and the Customer Services Team. This includes, but is not restricted to:

- mass mailings by services and departments,
- permanent or temporary changes to service provision
- if mistakes are made in information distributed to the public, and
- times of year when contacts with the council can be predicted to increase (for example the time of year at which green waste charges are due for renewal).

The corporate Customer Contact Centre can be more flexible and responsive to increased demand if the centre team can prepare for these types of peak periods in the year and increase resources temporarily if needed.

Customer Services Representatives (CSRs) are willing and able to respond to change. They have proactively raised concerns and ideas for improvement with their team leaders. In order to address the challenges facing the centre when it comes to retaining staff, greater effort is needed in order to raise the morale of staff.

## 2. Recommendations

The following are the peer team's key recommendations to the council:

### **2.1 Ensure that there is a corporate approach to improved customer access and experience**

All council services should be designed with improved customer experience at their heart. All customer, service user, or potential service user contact that the council has should have the same set of core principles, processes and systems, although there may be some exceptions to information sharing with specific Children's and Adult's enquiries. The customer should be able to expect that whoever they speak to can tell if the customer has called the council before and find out what has happened as a result of their original enquiry. This will minimise repeat calls and allow CSRs more time to focus on genuine new enquiries.

## **2.2 Improve internal communication and co-ordination**

This includes improving co-ordination between services and the Customer Service team to identify peak demand points and prepare for them. Establishing a council-wide co-ordinated mail calendar will help service managers understand and mitigate impacts on customer service. Ensure that there is a mechanism for CSRs to raise problems or ideas. Involve the Customer Service Team in supporting other services becoming more customer focused.

## **2.3 Consider greater involvement of councillors in corporate priority programme and project management**

In many councils, Councillors are intrinsically involved in programme and project boards to ensure that they understand how projects and programmes are being delivered. This also ensures that programmes are directly related to Councillor priorities. The peer team recommend that cabinet members receive performance reports on customer contact about the services they are responsible for. All decisions on who receives those reports remains with the Leader and Director responsible.

## **2.4 Improve co-ordination of corporate strategies, services and teams**

There are several corporate strategies and improvement teams relating to customer experience which could be better linked together. For example, customer experience information from complaints and from customer insight, as well as from the Corporate Contact Centre, could be analysed together to improve customer experience.

## **2.5 Explore ways to use technology to improve customer experience**

The peer team heard several references to “Digital First”. This needs to be clearly defined and staff given the information and tools to encourage customers to use the online opportunities that exist. The ICT team have expertise and can help to identify what technological solutions may exist to improve accessibility for customers. Live customer data is used in most contact centres to help improve wait times and performance targets for individual staff. The team recommend that Rotherham revisits the decision to remove live data in order that staff are aware of how many calls are waiting and encourage them to speed up call resolution and write up.

## **2.6 Involve key stakeholders to help service improvements**

Explore different engagement activities to maintain continuous improvement in the customer experience, particularly involving frontline staff and customers. For example, regular customer feedback, focus groups, consumer panels, customer satisfaction monitoring. Customer satisfaction monitoring is key, and it is important to proactively ask for feedback from customers. Involving staff in the design of systems and process (for the service they support as well as for the customer contact centre) is likely to improve morale as well as helping to improve the service customers experience.

## 3. Summary of the peer challenge approach

### 3.1 The peer team

Peer challenges are delivered by experienced elected member and officer peers. The make-up of the peer team reflected the focus of the peer challenge and peers were selected on the basis of their relevant expertise. The peers were:

Cllr Craig Cheney, Deputy Mayor, Bristol City Council

Karey Barnshaw, Head of Customer Experience, Charnwood Borough Council

Will Costello, Head of Digital and Transformation, Liverpool City Council

### 3.2 Scope and focus

The peer team considered the following themes

1. Leadership and Governance
2. Corporate Approach to Customer Access and Delivery
3. Understanding and engaging with customers
4. Service redesign
5. Human Resources and Organisational Development
6. Programme Management
7. Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and Information Management (IM) Strategies
8. Communications strategy
9. Accommodation/property strategy

Due to the nature of the findings, and the concerns of the council, the team focused more on some of these themes than others. The team did not look explicitly at Accommodation or property.

### 3.3 The peer challenge process

Peer challenges are improvement focused, tailored to meet a council's needs. The process is designed to complement and add value to a council's own improvement and performance, not to provide an in-depth or technical assessment of plans and proposals. The peer team used their experience and knowledge of local government to reflect on the information presented to them by people they met, things they saw and material that they read. They provide feedback as critical friends, not as assessors, consultants or inspectors.

The peer team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information in order to ensure they were familiar with the council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent three days onsite at Rotherham, during which they:

- Gathered information and views from around 20 meetings, in addition to further research and reading.
- Spoke to more than 20 people including a range of council staff together with members and external stakeholders.
- Sat in on conversations in the Customer Contact Centre
- Observed technology systems in the Contact Centre

This report provides a summary of the peer team's findings. In presenting feedback, they have done so as fellow local government officers and members.

## 4. Feedback on themes

These are the themes that Rotherham Council asked the peers to focus on.

### 4.1 Leadership and Governance

There is a drive from the Chief Executive and senior officers for a corporate approach to customer access, including improving the customer experience, working better together as 'One Council'. This will result in the council better serving its public, whether individual services have internal or external customers.

The Director responsible for improved customer experience corporately is Judith Badger. However, apart from managers with direct responsibility for the Customer Service Team, senior managers are not always aware of their role in improving customer experiences. Investment is needed to drive behaviour change corporately, and staff gave different opinions as to which manager or team leads that work. It is important that staff across the council are clear how the Corporate Customer Focus programme supports services improve their customers' experiences.

Performance data is routinely collected and monitored but is not always widely shared amongst the Customer Service Team nor with Cabinet members. CSRs could improve their performance and motivation if they are better aware of their weekly / monthly targets and how to reach them. Cabinet members could use customer service performance data to help determine the priorities of the council.



## **4.2 Corporate Approach to Customer access and delivery**

Although there is a clear council vision to improve customer access and experience, this needs to be better understood by officers and managers to ensure a clear corporate and consistent approach to customer service. For example, there could be a clear council statement that customer service is everyone's responsibility, not the sole responsibility of the Customer Service Team, and helping services define what that means for them. It might also help to change the name of the Customer Service Team so that they are not seen as the only team responsible for improved customer access and experience.

Relevant customer services professionals could help other services identify customer impact and design their work around an improved customer experience. It would also enable CSRs to deliver accurate messages, for example about service waits. Involving the Corporate Contact Centre in the corporate diary of mailshots will enable them to prepare for resulting surges in calls. Knowing when these may occur means that they could schedule additional resources as needed. This will help to reduce volume of calls.

There are several teams or projects which have a direct or indirect impact on improving customer experience. This includes: the Customer Services and Complaints team, the Change and Innovation Team, the Customer and Digital Programme, the various Digital Teams and the Customer Services Team. Some services (such as Children's Social Care or Housing) have their own customer contact centre. It is important to clarify how these teams work together, support each other and have common goals to improve customer access and experience, and make sure all relevant managers across the authority know how they interact.

Key strategies, such as the Workforce Strategy or Behaviour Strategy could be used to establish and monitor corporate values and behaviours and set out how the whole workforce will support the corporate customer service approach.

## **4.3 Understanding and engaging with customers**

The council has recently established a Customer Engagement Group to directly inform and improve customer accessibility and experience. The group helped to test new IVR, and the council has demonstrated this on its website, using the imagery to help recruit more people to the group. Customer Satisfaction is not currently

measured frequently enough to enable and monitor swift changes to service delivery. Customer Satisfaction should be measured across all services, and the peer team can suggest several different methods that Rotherham could employ.

#### **4.4 Service redesign**

As well as the Corporate Contact Centre, there are some customer contact centres providing specialist support, for example Adults' Services and Children's Services. However, customer service is generally seen (by councillors and officers) as the responsibility of the Customer Services Team and only this team talked about improving customer experience.

The Corporate Contact Centre could help deliver service improvements with better analysis and use of data from customer enquiries and complaints. An increased focus in demand management will change processes and systems; in turn this will improve the customer experience. For example, if CSRs are clear at the first contact about how long the customer should expect to wait for a response, this will reduce repeat calls.

All CSRs need to understand clearly the processes used by the services that they support and use this information in the conversations they have with customers. CSRs need to know how long service wait times are, and then ensure that customers are told these times at the earliest possible occasion. Although this means that there may be an initial uncomfortable conversation, it will reduce the volume of repeat calls.

CSRs are very polite and professional, but not always being skilled in managing calls efficiently. They may need to be given the additional appropriate training and support. Active use of a live dashboard for calls will help CSRs be able to see the number of calls waiting and calls dealt with as individuals and a team. This will help to shape individual and team targets.

CSRs could be upskilled to recognise early signs of potential additional needs in customer calls. This would be an excellent way to link all services together and give customers an overall positive experience. For example, if someone asks about assisted waste collections, a few additional questions could also identify whether the customer may also benefit from social care support.

The peer team suggest that Rotherham explores how different councils manage queues and reduced demand, and why they have selected these methods. The council could then use this information to determine the most appropriate queue management systems alongside demand management to reduce unnecessary calls.

Contact Centres are usually quite pressurised environments with a need to focus on solving the customer problem and moving on as quickly as possible to the next call. RMBC's Corporate Contact Centre could streamline processes such as writing up call content and customer enquiry.

#### **4.5 HR and Organisational Development**

This links closely with Service Redesign.

Improved customer access and experience is a corporate priority for the council. To support this, the peer team suggest that each service identifies a senior manager to drive this work forward. There are pockets of good practice, for example, the Head of Customer Service is working with Libraries to improve how customers access libraries and subsequently other council services.

There are inconsistent approaches to Performance Development Reviews (PDRs). There are examples of good practice, for example, team leaders with their staff. Staff within the Customer Services Team would be more accountable for their team targets if the PDR process, including individual targets, were better aligned with the Service Plan and Corporate Plan. Service specific briefings would help the team understand the vital role they play in delivering the Council's wider priorities.

Several teams spoke highly of business process re-engineering support that the Change and Innovation Team (CIT) has provided. However, senior officers tended to see this team as a strategic team setting direction and driving behaviour change rather than providing direct support to individual teams. This needs to be clarified in order to maximise the existing skills of the team and identify if different skills are wanted. The CIT could be very helpful in improving the links between the Customer Services Team and the services that the Corporate Contact Centre supports, as well as improving the processes and systems within the Corporate Contact Centre itself.

Staff in the Customer Services Team are open, and keen, to take on additional responsibilities, but understand that they need to deal with current issues first. CSRs

and Team Leaders are engaged and keen to improve customer accessibility and experience, but the council needs to recognise that it this is not all down to this team.

#### **4.6 Programme Management (Customer and Digital programme)**

There are several related customer and digital programmes currently underway, and it was not clear how well they link together. The Customer and Digital Programme does not appear to link with the Change and Innovation Team, and neither seem to link well with ICT department or Customer Service Centre.

Councillors could be more involved in programme and project management so that they can be better aware of the impact of changes.

#### **4.7 ICT and IM strategies**


This was not an area the team explored in depth, but the key message is to ensure that all relevant teams work closely together as they are both supporting others to deliver for the customer.

The website is technically fit for purpose, web forms that have been created specifically to improve digital customer service work well, and are what people expect from a council website. However, its focus appears to be focused on council processes rather than customer experience. For example, the main selections for customers on the website's front page are the corporate priorities of the council. If live customer experience data were appropriately shared, these selections could change according to the most prevalent customer request.

It would also be helpful to clarify who is the digital technical lead that ensures the website is regularly reviewed and improved, and how it integrates with other online channels of communication. Social Media is currently being used as a broadcast medium, rather than a customer service activity. As demand management improves in the Corporate Contact Centre, this could be an area that the Customer Services Team move into.

#### **4.8 Communications Strategy**

This was not an area that the team focused greatly on. Frontline staff gave examples from the recent past when they have reported ideas for improved customer access and experience but received little or no feedback on them. I



Greater cross organisational communication and working to improve how learning is shared between teams is necessary to improve service delivery, which will in turn improve customer experience.

## 5. Next steps

The LGA recognises that senior political and managerial leadership will want to consider, discuss and reflect on these findings.

Both the peer team and LGA are keen to build on the relationships formed through the peer challenge.

In the meantime, Satvinder Rana, Senior Regional Adviser for Yorkshire and Humber, is the main contact between your authority and the Local Government Association. Satvinder is available to discuss any further support the council requires. [Satvinder.rana@local.gov.uk](mailto:Satvinder.rana@local.gov.uk) .